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N. Korea-watching spurred by coming of Olympic Games

By Edward Neilan
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SEOUL, South Korea — With interest in the Korean peninsula increasing as a result of the forthcoming summer Olympics in Seoul, an augmented clan of "North Korea watchers" has sprung up to analyze and interpret what is perhaps the world's most closed society.

Like their cousins of yesteryear, the China watchers in Hong Kong in the 1960s and the Kremlin watchers camped across Europe in the 1950s, the North Korea watchers are mostly journalists, diplomats and academics.

They play an intelligence game based on little firm or first-hand information, some spy satellite photographs, some transcripts of tapped telephone conversations, a lot of second-hand media reports and ample amounts of guesswork.

Interest in information about the "hermit" state of North Korea has intensified as attention focuses on the Korean peninsula for the 1988 Summer Olympics, to be held in Seoul.

North Korea's efforts to block the games and the image-enhancement they will bring South Korea included the alleged blowing up of a South Korean jet aircraft last November. In 1983, North Korean terrorists tried to blow up the entire South Korean Cabinet while it was visiting Rangoon, Burma.

There are many other instances of incriminating evidence pointing

to North Korean involvement in terrorist activities.

There are no bureaus of Western news agencies in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, and diplomats are sheltered and glean "only cocktail party" chit-chat, as one Western embassy North Korea watcher put it.

"What we do is taken seriously by us, but others see us as playing an adult version of the parable 'The Blind Men and the Elephant,' where each observer interprets his 'feel' differently," the diplomat said.

Another North Korea watcher here had an even better sense of humor, although self-deprecating: "Can you imagine a professional, adult male spending his life analyzing the Rodong Shinmun [North Korea's official newspaper]?"

No one disputes that the North Korea watching process is susceptible to disinformation, the Soviet KGB specialty that makes communist-watching particularly frustrating and often deadly. The consensus among the clan is that Tokyo is the preferred North Korea watching base. The Japanese, who trade with North Korea, do more "people-type" intelligence because they have more travelers going to Pyongyang.

South Korean "North Korea watchers" tend to have "more bias and distortion" in their reports, although they "have a better feeling for North Korean patterns and decision-making instincts."

Official U.S. intelligence on North Korea is strong on high-tech surveil-

lance from satellites and other electronic devices.

American think tanks are getting better at compiling diverse materials about North Korea.

Washington's Heritage Foundation last week published an analysis by senior researcher Daryl Plunk, revealing that about 300 North Korean military advisers reside in Iran, training Iranian soldiers in aviation skills.

Another 300 North Korean advisers reside in Nicaragua to help the Sandinistas fight the resistance.

A recent shake-up in Pyongyang's upper echelons of power keeps North Korea watchers busy.

The army chief of staff, Gen. O Guk-ryol, was relieved on Feb. 22 and replaced by a former chief of staff and vice premier, Choe Gwang.

A North Korea watcher here said, "We know there have been changes after the Korean Air bombing and the explosion of an ammunition train, but we don't know what they mean."

The comeback of Mr. Choe, a stalwart from the first generation of military leaders, was viewed by some as a sign that North Korean heir-apparent Kim Jong-il is under fire.

Sadashi Takesada, a Japanese defense agency analyst, said the aircraft bombing might not have any link to the shakeup, as it has been attributed to the Worker's Party research bureau, and not to the military espionage apparatus.

If Gen. O has been disgraced, it is due to "some other thing unclear at the moment." But, added Mr. Takesada, "I can't think of anything else than the train explosion."

One thing on which North Korea watchers of every stripe are in agreement: Despite Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's pronouncements at Vladivostok and elsewhere about wanting to reduce tensions in Asia, Soviet military shipments to North Korea continue at the same or higher rate.

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